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SUBJECT: VISIT TO JAILED JOURNALIST SAKIT ZAHIDOV

REF: 2006 BAKU 1606

Classified By: Political Economic Counselor Rob Garverick,
for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: On October 27 Embassy official visited jailed journalist Sakit Zahidov in prison colony #14 south of Baku along with representatives from the OSCE, and French and Norwegian Embassies. Zahidov, who is serving a sentence for drug possession stemming from a 2006 arrest that many observers believe was engineered to punish him for his journalistic activities (reftel), is one of three prominent journalists in Azerbaijani prisons, the others being his brother Ganimat and Eynulla Fatullayev. He was allegedly beaten by prison guards on October 18, and the visit confirmed that he was in fact wounded. At the end of the visit, prison officials announced that Zahidov will be transferred to another prison, although it is not clear where or when. Zahidov is likely to suffer mistreatment at any other prison as well, and the transfer is unlikely to reduce the scrutiny this case and those of the other imprisoned journalists are receiving from international and domestic observers. END SUMMARY

INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY VISIT TO ZAHIDOV

12. (SBU) Family members Sakit Zahidov publicly alleged that prison guards beat the jailed journalist October 18 for refusing to have his hair cut upon his return to the prison from a medical treatment facility. A large group of domestic human rights defenders, following the disclosure, met with the Minister of Justice on October 21 regarding this incident. The Minister at that time promised to have Zahidov transferred to a different prison, but to date he has not been moved.

13. (C) On October 27 Embassy official accompanied representatives of the OSCE Office in Azerbaijan and the French and Norwegian Embassies to visit Zahidov at prison colony #14. The delegation was greeted by the head of the Discipline Division of the State Penitentiary Service and the prison administrator. The Discipline Division official explained that all prisoners are required to have their hair cut upon transfer from medical treatment. The eleven other prisoners transferred with Zahidov did not complain. He did not admit that any physical harm had been done to Zahidov, but said that they were investigating whether he could be transferred to a different prison. The official further explained that Zahidov often breaks prison rules, but the guards usually give him softer punishments than required.

¶4. (C) The delegation then met in a private room with Zahidov. Zahidov explained that his family had received threatening phone calls while he was in medical treatment, saying that upon his return to prison Zahidov would have trouble. Upon return to prison on October 18, Zahidov refused to have his hair cut, as it had just been cut in the hospital and his family was due to visit him the day after his transfer for his birthday. Zahidov explained that after his refusal the guards handcuffed him and squeezed his hands, which had been broken in a previous incident. When Zahidov complained, the guards, led by a Major Ali Nisami, beat him repeatedly. The guards then put him in an isolation room. Zahidov showed the delegation a wound on his side, which looked about a week old. Zahidov claimed he had further wounds still healing on his upper legs.

¶5. (C) Contrary to the claims of the prison officials, Zahidov stated that he is treated worse than the other 690 inmates of prison colony #14. In addition, his family suffers periodic harassment by government officials. Zahidov believes the GOAJ is trying to break him in order to change his views. Therefore, Zahidov, who has already served more than two-thirds of his three year sentence, stated he refuses to ask for a pardon, as this requires admitting that he is guilty, which he refuses to do. He also refuses to ask for early release, which is allowed once a prisoner has completed two-thirds of his/her sentence, because he says this involves paying a bribe of around 1,500 manats (1,830 USD). Zahidov finished by thanking the delegation for the visit, saying that there are people who want to bring democracy to Azerbaijan.

¶6. (C) After the talk with Zahidov, the prison officials brought the delegation into another office, and announced that it had just been decided that Zahidov should be moved to another prison for his own safety. When asked where Zahidov would be moved to, the State Penitentiary Service official stated that he did not know, but another official offered that he would be moved into Baku city. They also said he would leave in the first available car, but did not know when that would be.

PRISON CONDITIONS

¶7. (C) Prison colony #14 is designated for minor criminals, who are serving sentences of up to seven years, according to prison officials. Security was minimal compared to American standards, although the prison is miles from any other installation. Prisoners seem to sleep in dormitories, but are not allowed to be in them between 7 a.m. and 11 p.m. Therefore most of the 690 inmates appeared to be left outside during the day, despite the cool weather. It was cold even inside the prison buildings, as the buildings were old and drafty, without any heating system. The desk of the prison administrator was covered in papers showing prisoners names on hand-written charts* there is clearly no computerized control over who resides in the prison. This administrative backwardness may explain the difficulty prison officials had in naming a time and place for Zahidov's transfer.

COMMENT

¶8. (C) Azerbaijan's senior leadership repeatedly suggested to us during the election campaign that Azerbaijan's three well-known jailed journalists would be released soon after the presidential election. Thus far, that has not happened. This case, which received much publicity in the opposition press, further muddies the waters for Azerbaijan among international human rights observers. The prison visit revealed that Zahidov may in fact be demanding special treatment, which he believes he deserves given his status as a famous journalist, and which the prison officials do not want to provide. Prison officials are also nervous about the fact that Zahidov continues to write while in prison, and somehow manages to get his stories out of the prison and have

them published. Even if transferred, Zahidov will likely face similar treatment in another prison. With increasing attention put on these cases from domestic and international audiences, it is important that the GOAJ release Zahidov and the other imprisoned journalists to demonstrate the President's commitment to improving the human rights situation in Azerbaijan in his second term. The Embassy will continue to press for the release of the release of the jailed journalists. End comment.

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